

Euripides' *Medea*: Horror, Horror, Horror?

Emma Griffiths

"Should Euripides' child-killer end up looking like something from Psycho 2? Why not."

Benedict Nightingale, *The Times*, 31.3.01

Deborah Warner's production of *Medea* in London this year received good reviews, but, as the quotation above indicates, there was some unease about the scene when Medea kills the children. The murder was seen behind a perspex screen with copious amounts of blood and writhing about, just like a traditional horror movie. Warner's production was very powerful and culminated with a chillingly quiet scene between Medea and Jason, but the dramatic movement of the final scenes was fundamentally different from what Euripides had in mind.

The murders which Medea commits are presented to us in striking different ways. Creon's daughter suffers a grisly fate, liquefying like the Wicked Witch of The West, in *The Wizard of Oz*. Her death is reported to the audience in a highly charged scene, matching the messenger's distress with Medea's calm delight. By contrast, the 'deaths' of the children consist of a brief snatch of dialogue between the chorus (on-stage) and the children (off-stage) as Medea approaches to kill them:

Chorus

*Do you hear the cry, do you hear the children's cry?
O you hard heart, O woman fated for evil?*

One of the children (from within)

What can I do and how escape my mother's hands?

The other child (from within)

O my dear brother, I cannot tell. We are lost.

Chorus

*Shall I enter the house? Oh, surely I should
Defend the children from murder.*

A child (from within)

*O help us, in god's name, for now we need your help.
Now, now we are close to it. We are trapped by the sword.*

(trans. Rex Warner, 1946)

This is scary stuff, but the scene is presented with none of the fascinated horror and physical gore which accompanies the death of the princess. One reason for this is that the death of the children in its very nature is more terrifying than the previous murder. Everyone in the audience along with each of the characters has worried about the fate of the children since they arrived on stage. As the children come on and off-stage throughout the play the audience must wonder each time 'Is this the last time we will see them?' The murder of your own children is worse than the murder of an anonymous princess, because Medea perverts the expected relationship between parent and child, turning affectionate care into murderous violence. When Aristotle discussed the way tragic playwrights inspired fear and pity in their plays he noted that murders of family members (*philoï*) were the worst, precisely because they break the expected patterns of positive, supportive family interaction (*Poetics* 1453 b).

Psychological Horror

In terms of its very nature, then, the death of the children falls into a different category from the death of the princess. We shudder at the physical description when Creon's daughter dies, but we are concerned more with the psychological horror of the act when the children die. There is however, more to it than that, because in this drama Euripides plays with the conventions of the genre and the audience expectations. The death of the princess is a good, traditional piece of tragedy, death off-stage reported by the messenger. As the play moves on, however, Euripides subverts the pattern, questioning the nature of tragic deaths and by unsettling the audience make the horror of the final murder even greater.

Three aspects of the death of the children are unexpected. Firstly, the fact that the children speak is striking. We've seen them on-stage with no indication that they would have speaking roles – and children virtually never speak in Greek tragedy. Secondly, the fact that the children try to engage with the chorus is extremely disturbing. When characters die off-stage the chorus members traditionally wring their hands and wonder what to do, as they do when Agamemnon is murdered in Aeschylus *Agamemnon* 1343 ff. In *Medea* the children actually hear what the chorus members are saying, and they look to them for help. The chorus line 'Surely we should help them?' is answered by the child's line 'Yes, help us!' The audience is forced to contemplate an aspect of the dramatic illusion, and to question the convention by which choruses cannot intervene. We witness not only the children's cries for help, but also their horror that the chorus do nothing.

The final point of generic subversion is the most significant. The children's cries from off-stage respond to the chorus, but the main focus is the dialogue between the two boys. The issue of sibling relationships is prominent in the play, from Medea's regret that she killed her own brother to Jason's hopes that he will have royal sons as half-brothers for his existing children. When the children die we see a brief glimpse of this particular, positive relationship only to see it silenced. Distressing as this is, it is not the worst possible manifestation of the scene. This version is terrible, and a messenger description of the children's cries would have been heart-rending, but the audience has been prepared for a far more harrowing scene than this. Earlier in the play the chorus had questioned Medea's resolve:

*How, when you look upon them,
Can you tearlessly hold the decision
For murder? You will not be able,
When your children fall down and implore you,
You will not be able to dip
Steadfast your hand in their blood.* (860 - 65)

This prediction prepares the audience for a final scene in which the children will beg their mother to spare them, invoking ritual motifs of supplication. In terms of the play's psychological development we might say that when the time comes Medea already appears to the children as an avenging Fury, so they see no point in trying to appeal to her maternal instincts. In dramatic terms, the strategy is even more interesting. The audience has

been psyching themselves up to witness the death of the children as Medea ignores their pleas. Instead, they hear confused cries then silence. By the time the audience can adapt to this unexpected scene the children are dead. The horror of this is that for all the build up, the act of killing the children is over before you know it. The sudden end of the children's voices, combined with the following choral ode reflecting on the fate of Ino, create a chilling pause, and when Jason rushes in all ready for action we know he's too late. The frustration of audience expectation, therefore, creates a complicated and unsettling dynamic to close the play. Furthermore, this dramatic technique of flagging one scene and then presenting another allows Euripides to do two things for the price of one. The chorus' prediction makes the audience respond to that hypothetical situation with appropriate feelings of fear and pity, and then the same event is used to create a subtly different set of reactions. In a drama where Medea so explicitly considers her options, we may also see the playwright suggesting that stories can be played out in different ways. We should remember that the death of the children at Medea's hands was not the only tradition at this time in the fifth century. Earlier versions had told how the children were killed by accident or by the people of Corinth. Euripides may not have been the first to present this new variant, as the poet Neophron may have written a play along similar lines, but Euripides certainly demonstrates how good he is at manipulating the audience reaction and frustrating expectations. In the end the killing of the children for Euripides' original audience was less *Psycho 2* and more *Blair Witch Project*.

Emma Griffiths teaches classical literature at the University of Birmingham. Her book Children in Greek Tragedy: hope despite the times will be coming out in 2002.

For Medea on the web see

<http://www.albemarle-london.com/medea.html>
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/arts/story/0,3604,430679,00.html>
http://www.dc.peachnet.edu/~shale/humanities/literature/world_literature/medea.html

If you are interested in different approaches to producing *Medea* you might enjoy *Medea in Performance, 1500–2000*, edited by Edith Hall, Fiona Macintosh and Oliver Taplin, which has just been published.